

CHINESE TRANSLATION OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN AFRICAN ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY: A CASE STUDY OF GURNAH'S BY THE SEA

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ABSTRACT

African English literature is the most influential branch of African literature, carrying the history, culture, and politics of African countries, so the translation research of culture-loaded words in African English literature is of great practical significance. This paper takes Eco-Translatology as the theoretical guide to analyzing the strategies and methods adopted by the Chinese translator of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* in the process of adaptation and selection of culture-loaded words in the three dimensions of language, culture, and communication, with a view to providing insights for translation studies in African English literature.

Keywords: African English Literature; Eco-Translatology; Culture-Loaded Words; Abdulrazak Gurnah; *By the Sea*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tanzanian-British writer Abdulrazak Gurnah writes about African experiences in English, and his works are constantly nomadic between the writing of the history of colonization and decolonization in Africa and the plight of the African diaspora in the UK. Take Gurnah's sixth novel, *By the Sea*, for example, the Booker Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist connects personal suffering, family disputes, and national change in the memories of the African protagonists and their experiences in the UK. Based on the "three-dimensional transformations" of Eco-translatology, this paper analyses representative example sentences from the Chinese translation of *By the Sea* and explores how the translator achieves a balanced and harmonious translational eco-environment in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions during the process of creating translations of culture-loaded words in African English literature. The exploration of the translation strategies and methods adopted for culture-loaded words in the Chinese translation of *By the Sea* through Eco-translatology will provide reference and inspiration for the translation studies of African English literature worldwide.

2. ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

Eco-translatology, first proposed by Hu Gengshen at the beginning of the 21st century, is a research paradigm which takes the ecological perspective as an entry point to an overview of translation, building its foundation on the isomorphic metaphor between translational ecosystem and natural ecosystem (Hu Gengshen, 2013). This emerging academic paradigm takes ecological holism as its core, Eastern ecological wisdom as its basis, and the theory of "adaptation/selection" as its cornerstone, systematically exploring interrelationships and interactions between "textual ecology," "translator-community ecology," and "translation-environment ecology" for the synthesis and description of "the entirety of translational ecology"

and the ontology of translation theories” (Hu Gengshen, 2020). Based on the theory of “adaptation/selection,” translation is defined by Eco-translatology as the translator-led and text-based “selective activities of the translator during the process of adapting to the translational eco-environment and transplanting texts,” aiming for the ultimate purpose of cross-cultural information transmission (Hu Gengshen, 2020).

According to the theory of “adaptation/selection,” the process of translation is an alternating cycle of the translator’s adaptation and selection as the translator has to selectively adapt to the translational eco-environment, and at the same time implement adaptive selection of the target text as the translational eco-environment itself (Hu Gengshen, 2011). In this process, the translator, as an “ecological man,” is at the center of the source text and the target text, and shoulders the important task of “reconstructing the ecological relationship among the source text, the translator and the target text” (Luo Dijiang, 2020). Therefore, the translation with the highest “holistic degree of adaptation and selection” is, comparatively speaking, the optimal one in the view of Eco-translatology (Hu Gengshen, 2020). Accordingly, the translator who dominates the process of adaptation and selection is the fundamental factor in a successful translation (Hu Gengshen, 2013). Moreover, upholding the theory of “adaptation/selection” and “translator-centeredness,” Eco-translatology takes “three-dimensional transformations” as the main translation method, requiring the translator to carry out the adaptation and selection at least in the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions under the principle of “multi-dimensional adaptation and selection,” with the focus on the transformation of language forms, the delivery and explanation of cultural connotations, and the adaptation and selection of communicative intentions between the source language and the target language (Hu Gengshen, 2011).

3. CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN AFRICAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

3.1. Culture-Loaded Words

According to Newmark (2001), culture is “the way of life and its manifestations peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression.” As for culture-loaded words, they refer to words, phrases, and idioms that signify things specific to a culture, reflecting a particular people’s distinctive ways of doing things that have been gradually accumulated in the course of a long history and that are different from those of other peoples (Liao Qiyi, 2000). Moreover, based on the cultural classification proposed by Nida (1945), culture-loaded words can be divided into five categories: ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words and linguistic culture-loaded words. The cultural differences between different countries and nationalities make the translation of culture-loaded words a challenging task. Indeed, the biggest difficulty in the process of translation lies in handling the cultural differences, for what is self-evident in one culture takes a lot of effort to explain in another (Wang Zuoliang, 1989). After all, the uniqueness of national cultures allows each nationality to develop a very different cultural focus, which makes the various types of vocabulary in the discourse system develop increasingly complex and detailed, and then the semantic features of words between different languages appear to be in conflict or even absent, hindering the realization of the communicative purpose of translation (Liao Qiyi, 2000). The existence of culture-loaded words creates a lexical gap between the source language and the target language, and therefore when there is no shared knowledge between the author and the target language readers, the readers will confront a vacuum of sense, unable to connect the information in the discourse with the knowledge and experience outside the discourse (Wang

Dongfeng, 1997). Therefore, the translation of culture-loaded words with the highest degree of selective adaptation and adaptive selection is a crucial condition for achieving balance and harmony between the source text and the target text in terms of linguistic, cultural, and communicative ecologies (Hu Gengshen, 2013).

3.2. Characteristics of Culture-Loaded Words in African English literature

African literary studies have long been “grounded in an epistemological distinction between Europhone literatures and Afrophone literatures” (Marzagora, 2015), the former being typified by African English literature. As Zhang Yi (2011) points out, Africa’s long struggle for independence and liberation has deeply affected African literati whose complex and peculiar emotions have converged into “a black whirlwind,” and the most spectacular of all is African English literature. It is worth noting that African English literature demonstrates characteristics in the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, and its culture-loaded words are represented by the hybridity of languages, diversity of cultures and complexity of communication.

3.2.1. Hybridity of Languages

Writing in European languages such as English, a legacy of imperial colonization, is a strategic choice made by some African writers at the linguistic level. For example, Chinua Achebe (1965) holds the belief that the English language adopted and restructured by him is a “new English” that carries the weight of his African experience. In this way, the Africanized European languages became a mixture of African languages and Western discourses, which Bandia (2006) calls a “third code,” bi-language and bi-cultural in nature. For a large number of African writers, writing in English can effectively bring postcolonial texts into the cultural system of the colonizer, and that mastery of English therefore enables them to transform and restructure the language of the colonizer, creating from it a culture of resistance (Zhang Feng, 2022). Gurnah also supports and practices writing in English, proposing that African writers’ use of English challenges imperialist narratives, subverting and resisting distorted European discourses, and by blending words and sentences from Swahili, Arabic, Farsi and Hindi, etc., with the English language, Gurnah incorporates his own multicultural background to create a “hybrid” English literature (Zhang Feng, 2022). Thus, the primary characteristic of the culture-loaded words in African English literature is linguistic hybridity. An Africanized English text is bound to contain both English culture-loaded words and a large number of indigenous African culture-loaded words presented in multiple languages.

3.2.2. Diversity of Cultures

The African continent is known for its immense diversity and “continues to shift due to internal and external stimuli” (Falola & Sanchez, 2014). Naturally, the culture-loaded words of African English literature cover a wide range of cultures, including Western cultures, African cultures and so on. After all, it is commonly believed that modern African literature emerges from the crucible of colonialism (Gikandi, 2004). Take Zanzibar, Gurnah’s hometown, for example, this East African island is a mixture of indigenous, Islamic, and Western cultures due to its unique geography and complex history, and is therefore “a microcosm of the African continent” (Zhu Zhenwu & Li Dan, 2022). Naturally, Gurnah’s works also intertwine Western culture brought about by colonial invasions with Zanzibar’s long-standing cultures of the Swahili, Arab, and

Indian Ocean. Both the diverse indigenous and Western cultures build the source language ecology in the form of culture-loaded words. This is also the case for other African writers in English, whose works are characterized by a striking diversity of culture-loaded words in the cultural dimension.

3.2.3. Complexity of Communication

The works of African writers in European languages are notable for their specificity, “writing as translation” (Bandia, 2008). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’O (2009) refers to his early writing in English as a literary act based on mental translation. This special type of self-translation takes place in the creative process, transforming of the spiritual text of one language (usually the mother tongue) into the actual text of another language by the writer (Chen Ping & Zhu Zhenwu, 2023). Therefore, the process of creating African literature in English is the process of African writers, as author-translators, translating the spiritual text of their mother tongue into the English Language. The selective translation and retention of the African languages by the author-translator exacerbate the semantic ambiguity of the English texts. Take Gurnah’s works for example, they are mixed with multiple languages that highlight the multiculturalism of the African homeland, and in the face of requests from Anglo-American publishers to italicize non-English language or to attach a separate glossary of terms, Gurnah adamantly refused (Zhang Feng, 2022). By deliberately maintaining linguistic defamiliarization and semantic ambiguity in the process of self-translation, African writers in English have naturally led to communicative complexity. In addition, the hybrid languages and diverse cultures of the source texts place high demands on the readers’ breadth of knowledge and comprehension. Limited by their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the target language readers may have difficulty in understanding the communicative intention of the text, resulting in communication failure. Therefore, culture-loaded words in African English literature exhibit complexity at the communicative level.

4. THE TRANSLATION OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN THE CHINESE TRANSLATION OF *BY THE SEA* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

In translating culture-loaded words in African English literature, translators need to lay emphasis on selective adaptation and adaptive selection in at least three dimensions: linguistic, cultural and communicative, and strive to get the translation with the highest degree of adaptation/selection. The Chinese translator of *By the Sea* combines the strategy of domestication and foreignization in the process of adaptation/selection of culture-loaded words in the linguistic dimension, maintaining the balance of the linguistic ecology of the source language system and the target language system by means of zero translation, addition, and liberal translation. In the process of adaptation/selection of culture-loaded words in the cultural and communicative dimensions, the primary translation strategy adopted is domestication. The cultural and communicative ecological balance between the source language system and the target language system is maintained by means of liberal translation and addition, so as to create translations with a high degree of adaptation and selection.

4.1. Adaptation/Selection of Culture-Loaded Words in the Linguistic Dimension

Adaptation/selection in the linguistic dimension refers to the selective adaptation and adaptive selection of linguistic forms in different aspects and at different levels by the translator in the translation process (Hu Gengshen, 2011). Only when the optimal adaptation/selection is realized in the linguistic dimension can the linguistic ecological balance between the source language ecosystem and the target language ecosystem be achieved (Hu Gengshen, 2013). In terms of linguistic variety, the culture-loaded words in African English literature consist of two parts: non-English culture-loaded words and English culture-loaded words. The non-English culture-loaded words in the source language ecosystem of *By the Sea* mainly include words and phrases with African cultural characteristics presented in Kiswahili and Arabic, while the English culture-loaded words involve English idioms, allusions, proverbs and so on. The two are intertwined into a text, which builds a “macroscopic linguistic ecology” in the source language ecosystem by the harmonious “coexistence of dominant and minority languages” (Hu Gengshen, 2020). Therefore, in the process of translation, the translator adopts the strategy of a combination of domestication and foreignization, and seeks to maintain the linguistic ecological balance of the source and target language systems by means of zero translation, addition, and liberal translation. Examples are as follows:

Example 1: Aloe wood, ud-al-qamari, the wood of the moon.

Translation: 在斯瓦西里语里面，沉香木叫做ud-al-qamari，字面意思是“月亮上的木头”。

Analysis: According to the characteristic of African English literature, “writing as translation,” the Kiswahili word “ud-al-qamari” is a zero translation by the author himself in the source text. Kiswahili is the mother tongue of Gurnah and is the lingua franca of East Africa. As soon as “ud-al-qamari” appears, it brings the narrator Saleh’s thoughts into the memories of Zanzibar, and the stories in Africa unfold one by one with “ud-al-qamari” as the narrative clue. Loaded with African material culture, the Kiswahili word also naturally leads the source language readers into the East African cultural context from the linguistic level. Therefore, the Chinese translator adopts the foreignization strategy to retain the author-translator’s zero translation of “ud-al-qamari,” which reflects his “selective activity of adapting to the translational eco-environment” (Hu Gengshen, 2020). Moreover, on the basis of zero translation, the Chinese translator has added the linguistic and cultural information to the target language readers who do not know the African language by the in-text note “在斯瓦西里语里面,” transplanting the resistance to Western language and culture conveyed in the source language text.

Example 2: I could have laughed, I honestly could. Pull the other one, it’s got bells on. Not in a month of Sundays. Over the moon, sweet prince. The pious old fart had brought me all this way to initiate me into a dynastic feud or something.

Translation:

我本该笑出来的。真的挺好笑的。净说鬼话。都是没影的事。简直是天方夜谭。这个虔诚的老家伙把我带到这里来，就是想要给我拉仇恨。

Analysis: Here is the mental activity of the second narrator Latif as he talks to his father for the last time before leaving Zanzibar. Latif’s father, who had lost the title to the house due to a failed investment, now announces that the house will be given to Latif as an inheritance. In the source text, four English idioms and one English literary allusion are used by Latif to mock his father. The first ones, “pull the other one” and “it’s got bells on,” are expressions of disbelief in what the other person says. The translator translates them into the common expressions in the target

language ecosystem, “净说鬼话” and “都是没影的事,” which are clear and concise, and avoids misinterpretation of the linguistic culture-loaded words by the target language readers. The third idiom, “not in a month of Sundays,” is based on Western religious culture. Christians regard Sunday as the Sabbath, the day of worship in church, a day when enjoyment is forbidden, hence the sense of a long day. Once every day of the month was a Sunday, it seemed longer than eternity, but such a situation could not exist. So “in a month of Sundays” can mean a long period of time, and is often used to emphasize that something is very unlikely to happen. Accordingly, “not in a month of Sundays” is used to indicate that something is never likely to happen. The translator adopts a domestication strategy to translate this idiom, which is a cultural default in the target language, into the Chinese idiom “天方夜谭,” which originally refers to the Arabian folk tale *A Thousand and One Nights*, meaning absurdity and impossibility in Chinese. Through moderate domestication, the translator has successfully maintained the linguistic ecological balance between the source language and the target language in terms of lexical meaning and literary style.

However, the translator has simply omitted the translation of the fourth English idiom “over the moon” and the allusion “sweet prince” that follows it. “Over the moon” expresses a state of extreme happiness, and an examination of the entire source text from the perspective of ecological holism reveals that “sweet prince” is most likely an allusion to *Hamlet*. “Good night sweet prince” is the last farewell that Horatio says to Hamlet when Hamlet dies. Nowadays, this line is often used in English-speaking countries to bid farewell to a deceased loved one, or to pay tribute to an important person at a funeral. On the one hand, the allusion draws an analogy between Latif’s father, who is filled with enmity, and Prince Hamlet, who is also obsessed with revenge, conveying a sense of fatalism that his father’s hatred will lead to tragedy; on the other hand, Latif’s referring to his father as a “sweet prince” in their last meeting implies a spiritual patricide, suggesting an eternal farewell to his father and his country. In order to avoid losing the expressive effect and cultural connotation of the source text, “over the moon” can be translated into “笑死人了” through liberal translation, and “sweet prince” into “亲爱的王子” by literal translation, so as to achieve the lexical balance between the source language and the target language, as well as the balance between the value of use and the value of aesthetics, realizing the linguistic ecological balance in the textual ecosystems in terms of culture-loaded words (Hu Gengshen, 2013).

4.2. Adaptation/Selection of Culture-Loaded Words in the Cultural Dimension

Adaptation/selection in the cultural dimension, i.e., the translator focuses on the transmission and interpretation of cultural connotations in the process of translation (Hu Gengshen, 2011). This cultural dimension of adaptation/selection requires the translator putting emphasis on the differences in the nature and content of the source language culture and the target language culture, avoiding misinterpretation of the source text from the cultural point of view of the target language, and focusing on adapting to the whole cultural system to which the language belongs while translators are converting the source language culture (Hu Gengshen, 2011). The African continent is extremely culturally diverse, and African English literature involves Western culture, African culture and Islamic culture, etc. Translators must first adapt to the diversified source language cultural system when making adaptive selection of culture-loaded words for transformation in the cultural dimension. The Chinese translator of *By the Sea* adopts a strategy

based on domestication, and maintains the cultural ecological balance between the source language system and the target language system in the process of adaptation and selection by means of liberal translation and addition. Examples are as follows:

Example 3: On the night of the 27th Rajab, the Prophet was sleeping when the Angel Jibreel woke him and made him mount the winged beast Burakh who took him through the sky to al-Quds, Jerusalem. sky to al-Quds, Jerusalem.

Translation:

赖哲卜月（七月）二十七日的晚上，先知正在睡觉，大天使吉卜利勒来叫醒了，让他骑着长翅膀的仙马，腾空而起，从麦加飞到圣城耶路撒冷。

Analysis: Here is Salih's account of the name Rajab Shaaban, which involves multiple Islamic religious culture-loaded words. In Zanzibar, more than ninety-five percent of the inhabitants practice Islam (Pei Shanqin & Qian Zhe, 2019), so Islamic religious culture is a crucial cultural context that runs through the source language text. However, Muslims only account for about two percent of the total population in the target language ecosystem, and most of the people do not have any religious beliefs, so for the majority of the target language readers, the knowledge of Islamic culture is in a state of vacancy. In view of this, the translator mainly translates the religious culture-loaded words through addition. In the example sentence, "Rajab" refers to the seventh month of the Islamic calendar, and the translator not only translates it as "赖哲卜月" by means of transliteration with a category word, but also explains the concept further through a parenthetical note, which makes up for the lack of religious cultural information in the target language ecology. Besides, the addition of "麦加" before "圣城耶路撒冷" provides the target language readers with the unacquainted religious geographical knowledge. However, if the transplantation of the religious culture-loaded word in this case is examined from the perspective of ecological holism, the added information is not necessary, as the second half of the source text in which the example sentence is found explicitly states that the prophet's place of departure is Mecca. Therefore, the treatment of the addition of the cultural default should be based on the overall examination and understanding of the source text. Apart from the addition, the translator also converts "the winged beast Burakh" into "长翅膀的仙马" by means of liberal translation. "Burakh" is the name of the horse with the head of a man that the Prophet rode, and if it is literally translated as "卜拉格," the target language readers who lack the knowledge of this religious culture will be puzzled. The translator has fully grasped the cultural ecological structure of the source language and the target language, and translated "Burakh" as "天马" with reference to the image of the winged celestial horse in the ancient Chinese myths, which is a high degree of adaptive selection.

Example 4: The sea frothed and turned endlessly, catching the light of the stars in filigreed crests, signing and snapping and rushing at the rocks on our lee.

Translation:

大海泛着泡沫，不停地起起落落，映射着星星点点的光芒，叹息着、拍打着、冲击着背风面的岩石。

Analysis: The term "filigreed crests" in the source text refers to coats of arms decorated with gold and silver filigree work. An examination of the cultural systems in which the source and target cultures are located reveals that the heraldic culture of the West has a long history, and it is common for the prestigious families and groups to use specific crests as identifiers representing

their status, wearing them and reproducing them on objects such as letterheads or silverware, which is very common, but the development of hieroglyphic writing did not lead to the formation of a widespread culture of crests in Ancient China. In order to reduce the unfamiliarity of the target text caused by the cultural vacancy, the translator adopts the method of literal translation to translate this material culture-loaded word together with the previous text as “星星点点的光芒,” which conceals the cultural default that may affect the coherence of the target text, and provides target language readers with a clear and intuitive cultural image.

4.3 Adaptation/Selection of Culture-Loaded Words in the Communicative Dimension

Adaptation/selection in the communicative dimension refers to the selective adaptation and adaptive selection of communicative intentions that the translator lays emphasis on in the translation process, which requires the translator to focus on the communicative dimension in addition to the transformation of linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotations, and to pay attention to whether or not the communicative intention in the source text is reflected in the target text (Hu Gengshen, 2011). The Chinese translator of *By the Sea* adopts a strategy based on domestication to maintain the communicative ecological balance between the source language system and the target language system in the process of adaptation and selection, by means of addition and liberal translation. Examples are given below:

Example 5: Then he would sit at the back of the class with his eyes shut and a little smile on his face and listen to them recite from *Julius Caesar* or from Kipling or from ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’.

Translation:

他会坐在教室后面，闭上眼睛，面带微笑，听学生们背诵莎士比亚的《居里厄斯·凯撒》或者吉卜林的作品或者济慈的诗歌《无情的美人》。

Analysis: Here an English teacher of Zanzibar is seen enjoying the recitation of English literature by his pupils at a British colonial school. The English teacher appears to be an authentic Zanzibari, wearing kanzu and kofia, and a devout Muslim, but in fact has long since become a man of mimicry under the yoke of British imperial cultural colonialism. As the source language readers are mainly native English speakers who are familiar with *Julius Caesar* and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” the mere listing of the titles of these two works serves the communicative purpose of creating an image of a man deeply influenced by the hegemony of the imperial culture. However, the target language readers are not generally educated in English literature, and they probably know Shakespeare and Keats, but they are not familiar with these two works, which are not well-known to the majority of target language readers, so the literal translation of the titles of the works will easily lead to the failure of communication. Therefore, the translator fills the cultural gap in the target ecosystem by adding the authors’ names, successfully conveying the communicative intention.

Example 6: After independence and the departure of the Rulers of the Waves, the doors were shut and padlocked, and from the street the library looked like a disused warehouse or store.

Translation:

独立后，也就是海军出身的英国公使离开后，图书馆的门就关上了，挂了锁，从街上看，那个图书馆就像一座废弃的仓库或商店。

Analysis: Here is Latif’s recollection of the British colonizers’ evacuation from the colony at the beginning of Zanzibar’s independence. “Rulers of the Waves” refers to the Royal Navy, the

dominant maritime force that rode the waves to Africa for colonial expansion. The Royal Navy had been the most powerful navy in the world from the late 17th century to the beginning of the Second World War, hence “Rulers of the Waves.” As this social culture-loaded word is absent in the target language ecology, the translator adopts the method of literal translation to convert it into the lucid phrase “海军出身的英国公使” to avoid misunderstanding of the cultural connotations by the target language readers. In the process of adapting this social culture-loaded word, the translator mainly focuses on the conversion of linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotations but neglects the communicative intention, and thus fails to successfully transplant the author’s irony of British colonial hegemony. In order to make a proper adaptation and selection in line with the translational eco-environment in the communicative dimension, a combination of literal translation and addition can be adopted, adding the necessary supplementary explanations on the basis of literal translation, translating “Rulers of the Waves” as “海浪的统治者——英国公使,” while achieving the understanding of the target text in the target language eco-environment, realizes the communicative ecological balance between the source language system and the target language system.

5. CONCLUSION

Translation of culture-loaded words is a major problem in the field of translation, and the culture-loaded words in African English literature are characterized by their hybridity of languages, diversity of cultures and complexity of communication, which aggravate the difficulty of translating African English literature. Eco-translatology provides a new perspective and strong theoretical support for the translation of culture-loaded words in African English literature. The theory of “translator-centeredness” puts the author-translator and the target language translator of African English literature on the foreground of translation research. Meanwhile, the method of “three-dimensional transformations” based on the theory of adaptation/selection focuses on the selective adaptation and adaptive selection of linguistic forms, cultural connotations and communicative intentions between the source language ecosystem and target language ecosystem, which ensures the continuation of the culture-loaded words of African English literature in the ecosystem of the target language.

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